

## Chapter One

As Clare Askar sat in the lawyer's office, waiting to meet the uncle she had never seen before in her life, what seemed remarkable was not how quickly her responsible, quiet life had fallen apart, nor the idea of being put in the custody of someone she had never met. She couldn't process any of what had happened—the incident, the judge's order, her lawyer's solution. Nor could she quite face what lay before her. What seemed remarkable, instead, was the cobalt and ormolu clock on the lawyer's desk. It had just given a long, slow chime, and Clare's watch said clearly that it was only 1:53. "What is it chiming for?" she said at last, aloud.

"Hmm?" The public defender looked up from the papers he was reviewing one final time. "Ah. Saturn's just moved into... Capricorn," he said, peering at the clock's dome. "Some of my clients like to check the planets before they sign anything. At the big places, they run off a report for clients signing something important. And you might as well not practice law when Mercury's in retrograde. Your uncle will arrive soon, I'm sure. You're sure I can't get you some tea?"

Clare shook her head. "No, thank you, Mr. Bard," she said, for what seemed like the sixth time since breakfast. His staff had all been very kind—they felt sorry for her, she thought.

He rubbed his eyes a little. "It's good luck the Fae elders allowed the change of venue to the kinship courts instead of juvenile—good luck it was brought before them in the first place. But if your uncle will sign the order of guardianship, and we get it filed this week, it will be over and done with. You won't have a record."

The teenaged girl's ears flicked back faintly, though the glamor that concealed them from public view rendered it an invisible gesture. "I'm not a juvenile."

"It's a gray area with half-bloods, honestly. But, better a juvenile than a record for solicitation, I should think."

"I wasn't," Clare returned, agitated. "I didn't even know..."

"I know, Clare, okay? No one blames you. But we have to respect the judge's—"

He broke off as the door opened and a woman said, quietly, "Mr. Fairlea is here, sir."

"Send him right back." When the door closed, Bard began straightening his desk hurriedly, but he took a moment to look up at Clare's very white face, which was striking against the frame of her red-gold hair. "It's going to be fine, sweetie." He gave her a quick, tight smile.

Clare scarcely noticed, though she thought Bard kind enough, if obviously overworked. She'd spent the last two nights at his mother's house, after the judge had refused to release her on her own until the order of guardianship was filled. Mrs. Bard had been kind as well, but Clare couldn't bring herself to talk much to the woman after her lawyer had briefly described her case as a "Fae thing," making Clare feel immediately labeled as a kind of exotic specimen. In the acuity of her anxiety, time seemed to focus and stretch out the few seconds from the announcement to the door opening again, when she jumped to her feet.

Bard rose as well. "Mr. Fairlea, an honor. I'm Mike Bard, thank you for coming down

here. This is Clare. Clare, your uncle, Liam Fairlea.”

The pureblooded Fae before her had hair the color of dark barley and eyes that, when Clare dared to meet them for an instant, shone the same dark gold green as her own, their heritage lending an eerie luminescence to the orbs.

“Fiona’s child,” he said softly. He didn’t smile, not yet, but neither did he seem stern, merely solemn and perhaps even a little overcome, if she had considered it.

She murmured a very quiet greeting and submitted numbly to having both her hands squeezed firmly before they sat down.

Liam turned to face Bard. “I would have come down yesterday,” he said, frowning slightly.

“I apologize for that, Mr. Fairlea, we were waiting on some paperwork from the clerk’s office and I can’t technically release her until... but I have everything here today.”

“Then give me your papers to sign,” Liam replied without hesitation.

Bard was as taken aback by that as Clare was, and his mouth hung half-open for a few seconds. “Of course, of course, if you’re ready.” He fumbled and scrambled among the papers for a few moments, then pushed them over the desk towards Liam.

Clare didn’t know what to make of his haste. She’d expected some kind of horrible conversation about what had happened, what she had done, her mother, everything. Since morning, the fear of being put into her uncle’s custody had only been tempered by the thought that he would reject her, and she’d have to be sent to Romania and her father after all. “You’re just going to sign them? Without...” She couldn’t exactly verbalize the strangeness of being taken into custody at first sight, especially by him. Her mother might have said that Liam was the kindest of her family, but they’d been horrible people, cruel to Mother. If poor Mother had not been good enough for them, how could she, who knew almost nothing about Fae culture and etiquette and ceremonial things, ever be adequate?

Liam didn’t correct her for her outburst, though he looked a little taken aback and paused before replying, “Child, we’ve much to say to one another, but none of it’s for this office, hmm? I’m taking you home.” His voice was very firm, though not unkind, and he didn’t wait for her response before drawing a pen out of his breast pocket and leaning forward to sign in the half dozen places Bard indicated. With every stroke of the pen, he seemed to be taking her freedom into his hands.

And then what would he do with it? Clare was shaking very slightly, but no one took any notice. Bard went out of the office to make copies, still rather dumbstruck at the speed of things and the good luck of being able to make his filing deadline.

When Bard was gone, Liam turned to face Clare, and lifted one large hand to grip the back of her neck. “Settle,” he murmured.

The touch—his hand—*there*—it seemed to send an electric shock through her, and Clare’s head drooped submissively like a wilting flower, quite of its own accord. Her breathing sped up intolerably, and when her lips parted, a tiny, needy mewl escaped them. It was happening

again, Clare realized with horror, and one hand flew to her mouth to contain the sound. Oh, no. Just as when that Fae boy had growled at her from the doorway of the apothecary shop, her body was taking over, the powerful instincts that she had ignored for so long that she hadn't realized she had them were taking complete sway over her. Tears of distress filled her eyes as she tried to contain the intensity of her instincts at war with her upbringing.

To his credit, Liam didn't seem unduly taken aback or upset at her outburst. He squeezed firmly at Clare's nape, then released her. "It will be all right," he said, looking at her for a long time, then handed her his handkerchief. "Wipe your eyes, good girl."

Clare was quick to obey. She'd fallen apart in public more times than she liked to think about over the last few days. She clutched the handkerchief tightly in her hand to hide it when Bard came back, and when Bard handed over Liam's copies, it didn't seem strange at all to rise when Liam did, and follow him from the office. In another moment, she might have railed, at least inwardly, about the coldness and unfairness of it all, but already she was drawn to Liam's quiet assurance, and interested in something beyond her own troubles.

Liam looked at the satchel she carried over her shoulder. "Have you other bags?"

Clare finally managed a nearly inaudible, "No, sir. All my things are still at h—" She broke off, glancing up at him nervously. She was still a little afraid to make any sound, after the hideously inappropriate one she'd made, and afraid, too, of saying the wrong thing.

"At your old home," he completed, correcting her slightly, but without emphasis. "We'll have them sent, of course. Is there anything you need tonight?"

Clare shook her head, and he took her by the hand, as if she were much younger than her eighteen years. "Let's get you home, then."

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Liam said very little on the cab ride to his apartment, save that his wife, Ana, was looking forward to meeting her, and would be waiting there. "She was a very dear friend of your mother's once," he added in an undertone, but then did not speak again until they reached home.

Clare, a little frightened by his quiet and the ominous dread of it all, was surprised at the apartment she saw when she entered. Rather than the rigid, untouchable antiques she'd somehow imagined, the furnishings were contemporary and comfortable-looking. The afternoon sunlight, filtered into patterns by the trees outside, illuminated the space.

Ana was waiting for them, and she took Clare's coat and smiled warmly at the girl, but did not embarrass Clare by trying to kiss her or anything like that. "Clare, you must be so exhausted. Your uncle wanted to come get you last night, and I spent an hour on the phone with that Bard fellow's clerk, but it was no good. I have the kettle on—let me go make tea." She ushered Clare to a sofa and then disappeared into the kitchen.

Her absence left the two in privacy as Liam sank into an armchair with a restrained sigh. Clare, still gripping the balled-up handkerchief, looked around her at the eclectic décor. There was a playbill for Gilbert and Sullivan's *HMS Pinafore*, an old Wizard's Absinthe lithograph, and

a few expensive-looking paintings of the type that were too subtle to be appreciated by any eyes less keen than those of the Fae. To human eyes, they would simply be an ill-defined monochrome. Yet the apartment retained the air of a family home rather than any type of showcase, and Clare relaxed a tiny bit.

“Are you all right, Clare?” Liam asked. “I know this has all been very strange and upsetting for you. Ana cleaned our daughter, Tess’s, old room out for you—she was up late last night getting everything in order. I wanted to speak to you then, but that inept lawyer’s clerk wouldn’t give us the number.”

Clare shook her head, frustrated. “You don’t... you don’t *know* me,” she protested. “What happened... that thing I did... it’s not...” She fumbled for words, trying to assert something other than the poor little half-blood fool who’d begun to display at an aggressive male’s display and been arrested for solicitation. Something other than the creature who’d hung her head and lost control at a single touch from her uncle’s hand. “It’s not me,” she said, finally.

“It isn’t all of you,” he agreed gently, “but it is some of you. How much did your mother tell you about your Fae side as you were growing up?”

“Only a little. I was only eleven when she died.” Clare did not like to say, before him, most of what her mother had told her—that the Fae were superstitious and brutal beneath their veneer of ultra-civility, and that the old claiming rituals that happened much more rarely these days were only the most obvious remnant of a very savage state of things indeed. “She spoke of you, sometimes. She sounded... she was fond of you, I think.”

“I failed her, though, Clare,” Liam said quietly. “If I had not failed her, she need not have run away and kept you from us.”

“If she hadn’t run away, I wouldn’t be here,” Clare pointed out. “She said her parents were cruel. She would not speak of them.”

“They did not mean to be cruel, Clare,” he said, looking rather pained. “Fiona—she was so brilliant, so lovely. But, she would not submit to our parents, nor even openly explain herself. She frightened them—they did things they never would have, otherwise, because they were afraid of what a mate might do if she behaved so defiantly. They tried to break her of her stubborn streak, and made terrible mistakes. I was not permitted to interfere,” he said in a low voice, “but I should have tried harder. She had no submissive instincts. She should not have been forced into old-fashioned training. But, our parents couldn’t conceive of anything else for their beautiful, promising daughter. It was their pride that failed them, I think. Fiona would not open up to anyone, she just... shut down. They badly mishandled her.”

Clare went extremely still, hardly breathing, as he spoke of training. Her mother had spoken of training to be mated as the greatest calamity in her life, the end of all her happiness among her own people. Fiona had never given any details, but once Clare had heard her speaking out against the old-fashioned Fae upbringing as an excuse to treat young girls in need of guidance worse than they would a horse. Yet Liam spoke of mistakes, and of forcing as error.

“Your daughter—you didn’t force her into training?”

He laughed slightly. “Tess? By the time she was old enough for her training, she cried with relief to be taken in hand. But I would not have forced her if she couldn’t surrender. You can tell very early how a girl answers to constraint.” His eyes fixed on her face. “But untrained girls with strong submissive instincts can be very dangerous—principally to themselves. You understand, don’t you, that you were displaying, trying to attract a mate?”

“I’d heard... jokes about it,” Clare admitted. “But until that boy growled, I’d never done anything like that before. I didn’t even think about it.”

“There’s nothing wrong with it, Clare,” he said patiently. “You need to understand that. It’s treated as a bit of a joke sometimes because, while Fae are mostly very reserved in public, a few have trouble restraining their instincts. Because you haven’t been trained, you don’t have the tools to control your responses.”

“But I’ve been among the Fae before,” she said. “Even males. I’ve had Fae professors and classmates at Lyon. I never did anything like that before. Why now?” she asked, very plaintively.

“You’re a student at Lyonesse Academy?” Liam smiled at Ana as she returned with a tea tray and sat down beside Clare on the sofa.

Clare nodded jerkily. “I’m finishing up my second year. I’ve already received acceptance to the enchanter program next year.” The thought of Lyon made Clare’s stomach tighten.

Ordinarily the Academy was her haven, the place where she could use her studious focus to shine. Now, even if she wasn’t sent down for the rest of the term, everyone would still know what had happened to her. And that was presuming that Liam didn’t peremptorily yank her out to start keeping her in a stable or whatever he was going to do. She thought, if it came to that, her father might come home to interfere... but she wasn’t entirely sure. He hadn’t been back to Chicago since he’d received the job offer to manage an all-werewolf rugby team in Romania, and he didn’t call often, either, citing the expense.

“You plan to become an enchantress?” Liam asked.

“Mother started teaching me charms and cantrips when I was very young. It’s all I’ve ever wanted to do, to be like her.”

“Fiona could sing the birds from the trees—literally,” Ana put in softly. “She used to sing to them, as if she were challenging them to best her, till they would all light down to listen.”

“I remember,” Clare said. She didn’t mean to sound cold, but it stung to have someone else trying to tell her about her dear mother. Liam and Ana might have known Mother when she was an unhappy girl, but that meant they didn’t really know her at all.

“To return to your question,” Liam said, “any Fae who taught at, or attended, Lyonesse would of course have his instincts well in hand. Display isn’t often triggered simply by the presence of a male, even if he’s in rut. It’s a matter of responding to signals. Young Fae of your age are unpredictable, though—it’s why the age of majority doesn’t occur until the third decade. It’s why you’re here.”

“But I’m not Fae,” Clare said, growing more and more frustrated. “I’m human as much as

anything.”

“As much as, perhaps, but not more than,” Liam corrected. “That’s why mixed marriages are so dangerous. You’ve been raised without the support of the clan, or a family that can understand what you’re going through. If I had known... if there had been any way to get you seven years ago, when word came that Fiona had passed....” He shook his head. “But you’re with us now, and that’s what matters.”

Clare wanted to protest, to say that her father wouldn’t have allowed her to be taken away, but again, she was not entirely confident of the truth of that. Though Clare had certain tender memories of her papa’s lively pleasure in his small family before her mother’s accident, since then, he had never been more than a distant, dutiful stranger who used his work to keep him from home. In the end, it didn’t seem a point worth fighting on.

“What are you going to do to me?” she asked, unable to keep any longer from the question that had been thrumming inside her head since Liam had signed the papers.

Ana made a little noise—not actual disapproval, but certainly dissent, and pressed a cup of tea into Clare’s hands. Clare sipped at it mechanically, but her gaze never left Liam’s face as she waited for him to answer.

“Sweetheart,” he said at last, “I hope you’ll never speak like that once you’ve come to understand me better, but I know you’ve little to judge from, at present. When a girl surrenders her will to her family, it’s a very beautiful thing. For as much as some families focus only on constraining a girl’s flesh, it is a high, and indeed, holy practice, if done correctly.” He smiled warmly at Ana as he spoke. “Those who accept the protection of a girl’s heart must always be earning the trust placed in them. Our generation is wiser in this, I hope, than our elders were.”

“But then why do it?” Clare burst out. “Why not let her be happy?”

“It’s done so that she may be happy, don’t you see?” Ana interposed. “So that she may have perfect trust in the elders who love her first, and then in the mate who will hold and protect her will forever. Because submission and constraint free her spirit and mind to grow in the service of others. You have heard, perhaps, of the Fae sorceresses whose powers blossomed exponentially after they surrendered their wills? Or even the sibyls at Delphi, who offer their wills to the gods, that they may gain the gift of prophecy? It’s because giving yourself over to a truly worthy protector makes you more than you could ever be constrained by your own whims and passions.”

“I’m not asking you to surrender now,” Liam said reassuringly. “You’ve had a horrible week, and you do not understand, yet, what is asked. For now, we only want you to settle in here. You’ll continue in your classes at Lyonesse, and you’ll be treated as my own daughter. I shall expect you to offer me the same obedience I trust you gave your father when you lived with him.”

Clare nodded, rather listlessly. Yes, she’d been obedient. Dutiful and quiet, keeping out of trouble, till now, when she was left to her own devices and seemed to have stumbled into terrible trouble without even knowing to beware of it. “I understand.”

Ana took Clare to her room. It had a big window seat, with a pair of built-in bookcases facing the little retreat, and Clare couldn't help going to touch the spines of the books, and the softness of the cushions heaped on the seat. Ana laughed softly. "I see you already like Tess's window seat. Liam put it in himself as a present for her birthday, some years ago, and I barely managed to convince him not to tear the building apart to send it with her when she married."

"Where does she live now?" Clare asked.

"In the Black Forest. In one of the thin places, you know. Her mate is a guardian of the ways." At Clare's rather blank look, Ana explained further. "Between this and the Old World."

"Oh." Clare understood better then. All the Fae were drawn, at times, to the "Old World," a place very few humans had gone since the Faerie courts had withdrawn completely from the world of men. Many Fae clans had chosen to stay and live among humans, but their children were still always citizens of both worlds. Her mother had spoken only rarely of journeying to the Old World, and the creatures and flowers and colors she'd seen there. But the passion of her speech had left an indelible yearning on Clare's young heart.

"I cleared out the closet for you. You must consider this quite your own room now, and when your things are sent, it will feel more homelike. Do you need anything before then? Are you hungry?"

"No, thank you, Aunt Ana," Clare answered, still too uneasy to feel much like eating. "I'd like to lie down for a while if... if that's all right." The final words, the request for permission, were spoken grudgingly.

"Of course, darling." Ana gave Clare a very light kiss on the temple, and pulled back the prettily embroidered coverlet. "All the linens are fresh. Come and find me if you need anything. I'll tell Liam you're going to rest. I imagine he'll like to tuck you in. Welcome, Clare."

The mention of being tucked in took Clare aback, for she could not recall any such thing occurring since before her mother's death. As if she were just a little girl! But Liam had made it very clear that to him, she was more or less that. Clare undressed a little, making sure to put her things away carefully, and climbed into bed. She felt very vulnerable and unhappy as she waited for her uncle, for perhaps he only wanted absolute privacy to announce or do something horrible.

Since her mother had never given any details about her unhappy upbringing, Clare's imagination had spun a thousand terrifying phantasms, most of which were highly improbable, but all very frightening and compelling. It was those phantasms in her mind that threatened her now, making her tense and miserable.

But when Liam knocked quietly at the door, then entered, he did not look very terrifying at all. He smiled warmly at Clare and sat down on the bed beside her. "Are you comfortable enough, sweetheart? You don't want the radiator on?"

"No thank you," Clare said, not quite slowly enough to be disrespectful.

"No, thank you, Uncle Liam," he corrected her, still very gentle.

He hadn't touched her yet, and already the back of Clare's neck was tingling, and her breathing was speeding up as deep emotion that she could not yet identify swept through her

body. “No, thank you, Uncle Liam,” she repeated, rather breathlessly, and her big eyes were a little unfocused.

“Good girl,” he praised, leaning down to give her a gentle kiss on the forehead.

The praise and the touch on her forehead made Clare melt with relief, but before she could quite process that, he lifted his hand so that it cupped the nape of her neck. She gave a long, trembling sigh as the sensation of submission flooded her body with relaxation. All the things she feared seemed put entirely at bay by the firm assurance of his presence and his touch. She did not speak—could not, and her eyes fell closed. She really was so tired....

By the time Liam finally withdrew his hand and dimmed the lights, Clare was unconscious of the loss, having fallen into a deep, exhausted slumber.